WHY?

March 2, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"And he answered them, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus?'"
--Luke 13:2 (RSV)

Scripture
Luke 13:1-9

Russell Baker, nationally syndicated columnist for the New York Times, is a witty and wry observer of the human condition. He wrote a best-selling autobiography, Growing Up, which is warmly human and occasionally provocative. Near the beginning of the book Baker recalls what it was like, at the age of five, to be told that his father was dead.

"He was 33... When I came running home, my mother was still not back... I was sent to the opposite end of town to Bessie Scott's house.

"Poor Bessie Scott. All afternoon she listened patiently as a saint while I sat in her kitchen and cried myself out. For the first time I thought seriously about God. Between sobs I told Bessie that if God could do things like this to people, then God was hateful and I had no more use for him.

"Bessie told me about the peace of heaven and the joy of being among the angels and the happiness of my father who was already there. The argument failed to quiet my rage.

"'God loves us just like His own children,' Bessie said.

"'If God loves my why did he make my father die?'

"Bessie said I would understand someday, but she was only partly right. That afternoon, though I couldn't have phrased it this way then, I decided that God was a lot less interested in people than anybody in Morrisonville was willing to admit. That day I decided that God was not entirely to be trusted.

"After that I never cried again with any real conviction, nor expected much of anyone's God except indifference, nor loved deeply without fear that it would cost me deeply in pain. At the age of five I became a skeptic and began to sense that any happiness that came my way might be the prelude to some grim, cosmic joke." [Growing Up, pp.61-62; See also Theology Today; 1/86, Burton Z. Cooper, "Why, God? A Tale of Two Sufferers."]

In a remarkable movie, Hannah and Her Sisters, Woody Allen is at it,

as well, posing his favorite question about the meaning of life in light of its end, and in light of human suffering.

The question is asked on all sides. Why? Why do innocent people suffer? Why do tornadoes, hit nursing homes? Who does cancer strike young mothers, and fathers have heart attacks? Why evil and suffering at all? The question is asked even in the midst of our high and holy festivals if you listen carefully enough. Who will say a word, for instance, for the Egyptian infants - whose Passover deaths resulted in the Exodus? Or the innocent babies of Bethlehem who were slaughtered by a psychotic tyrant immediately after Jesus' birth? The season of Lent itself moves toward a cross. Five days after an enthusiastic crowd welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem, a larger, hateful mob, out of control, would scream for his execution. One of the few things he said that was remembered and recorded in the language in which he said it was, "Why?"..."Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani," he said from the cross. "My God, why have you abandoned me?"

We follow this Lord to his death in Lent. And the human part of following is the asking, age after age, "Why?" Why do things have to turn our this way? Why does a gentle man who spent his life loving other people and helping them live more fully end up with other men's spit dripping off his face, a public spectacle, executed, with no more or less public importance than the night-time electrocutions which have returned to entertain and comfort us. "Why?"

It is asked on all sides. Russell Baker of the Times, Woody Allen, Jesus on the cross, Job sitting on the pile of ashes that used to be his home, his possessions, his family, lamenting:

"Though I am innocent, I cannot answer
For he crushes me with a tempest
And multiplies my wounds without cause..."
[Job 9:15,17]

Friends of Jesus posed the question one day in the same, familiar context - random, unjust and senseless human tragedy. There had been a public protest involving some Galileans. The government had reacted by murdering them - all of them, just common people, while they were at worship yet, in the Temple. Over at Siloam a construction accident had killed eighteen workers. Why? The best thinking of the day concluded that suffering resulted from sin.... "Do bad things...and bad things will happen." Sometimes that's true. Jesus told those who were with him that, as a matter of fact, they were headed for disaster if they didn't mend their ways. But he rejected the best wisdom of his day and the traditional answer to the question of suffering. Those people did not die because they deserved it, or because God was punishing someone.

In our day the question is asked relentlessly and eloquently by Jewish author Elie Wiesel, who survived the holocaust to think about it and write about and ask it... Why? In a world we want desparately to believe is good, why is there such monumental evil? Some of Wiesel's stories are almost too poignant, too powerful to retell. They involve elderly people

and you people, Wiesel's family - being executed by the S. S. concentration camp guards. "Where is God? Where is God now?," one of the characters in a novel asks as he witnesses the hanging of several men and a boy. Wiesel's answer is stunning: "He is there - hanging on the gallows." Wiesel and others know that something is radically different for all of us after Auschwitz. Either God is dead - there on the gallows, or the comfortable theology of a good providential God is what died in the Holocaust, or - most provocatively, God is there, somehow involved in that ghastly scene.

In the objective saftey of the academy the scholars have always known that the question of evil in the world and human suffering is the philosophic question. Academically the problem can be expressed in a tightly logical sequence -

a. God is good

b. God is all powerful

c. There is observable evil in the world,

Therefore

d. God either causes the evil, in which case one wonders about God's goodness, or

e. God allows the evil, in which case one wonders about the goodness some more, or

f. God can't do anything about the evil, in which case one wonders about the power.

Mostly the issue presents itself to us personally in full power and poignancy, not as philosophic abstraction, or a story in a book, but in the reality of suffering we encounter and experience in our own lives. Why, if there is a God in heaven, is there suffering at all? Who among us has not asked it? "What have I done to deserve this? What is the reason for this?"

The traditional answers are not satisfying. Sometimes suffering is a result of sin, but not all suffering is explained that way. The little parable of the fig tree in our text this morning is a fact of life. There is a cause and effect relationship sometimes. Engage in gluttony and pay the price: violate the atmosphere and watch the trees die: pollute the water and get sick. Thomas Jefferson, who struggled with the morality of slavery even while living with it and profitting from it, said that he trembled for his country when he remembered that God is just. If there is a just moral order in the universe, injustice is an essential violation, a disturber of the order. It will be paid for. We - all of us - still suffer because of the corporate, societal sin of slavery. Generations later we are still paying for it.

But not all suffering can be reduced to that equation. One time Jesus rejected the suggestion that a man was born blind because of his parent's sin. Job's friends tried the argument on him and were wrong. Job was innocent. We bring some suffering on ourselves - but not all suffering.

"It is God's will" we are told by well-meaning souls in the midst of grief. "It will teach you something." And our intuition rebels, just as surely as Russell Baker's did. All you have to do is stand by the bedside of a dying child to know that while you may indeed be learning something, it is blasphemy even to suggest that God is stage managing it for your edification. The idea that God causes suffering is contrary to every word of the New Testament.

William Sloane Coffin, Senior Minister of Riverside Church in New York City preached at his son's funeral several years ago. His son had died in an automobile accident. He told about a woman who, meaning to be helpful, had said, "I just don't understand God's will." Coffin's response is one of the most honest and eloquent Christian statements on the subject I have ever read...

"Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper of his, that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that he probably had a couple of 'frosties' too many? Do you think it is God's will that there are no street lights along that stretch of road and no guard rail...? The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is 'It is the will of God.' Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex died: that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."

As we think through the difficult matter of the reality of evil in God's world, may we have the courage and theological integrity to say that God does not will it. May we also have the mature love to understand the spiritual pain of the dear person who must not only suffer but hear others say that God is responsible for it.

We are left, however, without an answer. In fact, we are left with the realization that the Bible doesn't answer the question: that scripture does not always supply simple answers to tough questions. Job's lament is resolved when he remembers the transcendent holiness of God and confesses that he had been speaking when he should have been listening. The Biblical response to the question of suffering is the being of God:

"My thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways
says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are my ways higher than your ways
And my thoughts than your thoughts."
[Isaiah 55:8-9]

That is not an answer, of course. It is a suggestion that we may be

asking the wrong question. But ask it, we must, it seems. And if God doesn't cause suffering to punish us or to teach us a lesson, why does it exist? Why does God allow it? The reason has to do with our freedom, because God values human freedom. God has created a world so free that magnificent things can happen and terrible things: Mozart and Adolf Hitler, beautiful sunsets and murderous volcanic eruptions, a world class athlete and birth defects. Biological mistakes occur, and jet engines fail, and people fall off step ladders. There is no celestial puppeteer pulling the strings. Rather God gives us the risks of freedom in the same way as a human parent does. Parents want children to stand alone, to be strong and live their own lives, and in order for that to happen a freedom must be extended in which they can, and frequently do, get hurt. There is no other way. To guarantee their safety is to prevent them from becoming persons. It is never to let them out of sight. It is to rule out the delight of swinging because he might fall, or swimming because she might drown, or riding a bicycle because he might be hit by a car. To let a child out of sight is significantly to increase the danger and possibility of tragedy. And the better part of parenting is just that loving and granting freedom, and then being there with strength and comfort when suffering results. It is not easy. To watch a child suffer because of the freedom you extended is painful. To resist the temptation to intercede is very hard. To love is to accept the risks of freedom.

The Christian word on suffering and evil in the world is not an answer, in the final analysis. The Christian word begins with the uncertainty of all of history. We don't know why. We know what doesn't sound right, or seem to fit. We know what we can't bring ourselves to believe. But we don't know the answer.

Our word about suffering begins with the belief that in Jesus Christ God participated fully in our humanity. The theological name for the Christian word about suffering is Incarnation.

At the heart of the faith which we embrace and which we hold out to one another, is the belief that God held nothing back when he became a human being in Jesus Christ. The New Testament does not pull back from the radical implications of his humanity, although Christian people sometimes do. The Gospel narrative presents a Christ who was born as one of us, grew up in a family, learned a trade, made a vocational choice, enjoyed friends, laughed and cried, was joyful and angry, liked good food and drink enough that critics one time called him a glutton. The astonishing assertion is that Jesus was fully human: that when God came among us he did so without reservation or condition. That means that when Jesus was crucified, when he experienced the searing intensity of physical pain, and the even deeper pain of loneliness and abandonment, God experienced it, was subject to it, felt it. That is the beginning of our word on suffering.

Christianity presents its Lord, at the climax of his life, not ascending a throne, but rejected by society, betrayed by his disciples, abandoned by friends and ridiculed by the powerful leaders of his nation. Christianity's highest and holiest and most meaning-filled symbol is a cross and its most profound assertion is that God was on it: that God took

on himself the suffering and evil and pain and loneliness which was that death.

That is the response of faith to the question of suffering. The cross of Jesus Christ is not an answer to the dilemma. As a matter of fact I'm not certain that we would find an answer helpful even if there was one. What we need is something to stand under, something to hole on to. The cross is, for us, a brave, beautiful, life-saving victory because, by God's grace, what appears to be proof of suffering's permanence and the power of evil, is transformed, becomes a symbol of something entirely different - a love that will never let us go. Here we are promised that the God who created us in freedom does not simply observe our lives, our comings and goings, our joys and tears, with studied neutrality.

It is here we are promised that when we laugh, God's laughter echoes our own: and when we weep, God's own tears mix with ours: and when we hurt and cry out, "My God, why have you abandoned me?" God hears and knows and feels that deeply too. And when we love the world or life, or another person so deeply we do not even have words for it, God's humanity encompasses that as well.

Here, at the cross, we are promised a mystery: that God is involved with human suffering, shares human suffering, takes human suffering into his arms and heart. It is here at the cross of Jesus that we know that in suffering we are not alone and will never be alone: that nothing in creation - not even this - can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Why?

The cross of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, God participating fully in our humanness, is the Christian word on suffering and evil. It is also the Good News. Thanks be to God. Amen.